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SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO STANDS ON HIS SOAPBOX FOR RUSSIAN
JOURNALISTS

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¶1. Summary: President Lukashenko spoke at a November 23 press conference with approximately 100 visiting Russian reporters from provincial media outlets. With his characteristically bizarre statements, Lukashenko criticized the Russians for stalling the creation of the union state, not helping Belarus join the WTO, and generally not appreciating Belarus' strategic importance. He asserted his confidence in winning the upcoming presidential elections, but vowed to step down if he lost. He eschewed the need for foreign investment and called for "labor camps" for negligent parents. The President also commented on Belarus' neighbors, business, migration, and other domestic policies. End Summary.

The Russian-Belarusian Union

¶2. Lukashenko opined that the Union State would be built on principles of openness, volunteering, and equality and would bring prosperity to both nations. He blamed Russia for delaying the adoption of the draft Constitutional Act by making "sudden" changes, causing the Belarusian side to take more time to review the document. Lukashenko rejected claims that he was to blame for Belarus' slow integration with Russia, claiming that it would be his "political death," as it was a process that he had started. He accused President Putin of trying to create a Union built on European Union principles whereas Lukashenko insists on using the Soviet Union model. Lukashenko reiterated that Belarus would not become part of Russia. He denied rumors that the Russian-Belarusian Union would have a presidential post and refused to comment further, fearing his remarks would be "turned against" him.

Mourning the Loss of the USSR

¶3. Lukashenko told reporters that Belarus was Russia's "last western outpost," the land where "not a single Russian would ever feel bad." He then claimed Belarus has never let tanks move across its territory to Moscow and never will. [Comment: Technically true, the German tanks were stopped just short of Moscow.] He mourned the breakup of the USSR, calling it a "tragic mistake" that the West had orchestrated and financed. Lukashenko also blamed the USSR's collapse on former speaker of the Belarusian Parliament Stanislav Shushkevich. According to the President, Shushkevich did not have the right to sign the 1991 Belovezhskaya Pushcha agreement that dissolved the USSR since he did not have the Belarusian parliament's permission. Russia, particularly Mikhail Gorbachev, was too soft in handling the matter and

should have sent the Alpha commando unit to gather the signatories, wrap them in barbed wire, and let them report to President Bush what they were signing.

Criticism of Russia and Others

¶4. The President hoped relations with Poland and the Baltic countries would return to normal in the future. Belarus' relationship with Ukraine was "good", despite the GOU's "envy" and "jealousy." According to Lukashenko, Kiev has always criticized Belarus in order to emphasize its own achievements.

¶5. Ukraine and Russia are aware of Belarus' policy and know that Belarus has never "bowed" its head to anyone nor danced to another country's beat. Belarus' policy supports Belarusians' interests. Russia knows that Belarus is its last line of defense against the West, but Belarus does not receive its deserved credit and is often unnecessarily criticized in the Russian press. Lukashenko pointed out that Belarus may have infringed on its neighbors' interests when making itself "room" following the collapse of the USSR, but hoped that neighboring countries did not take offense.

¶6. According to Lukashenko, NATO is patrolling the border and using their radar to scan Belarus and Russia "all the way to the Kremlin," but Russia does not take the threat seriously. Russia would rather let its S300 surface-to-air missile systems "rot in a field" than give them to Belarus for free. Instead, Belarus must pay for them.

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On Russia and the WTO

¶7. Lukashenko accused Russia of abandoning Belarus on the way to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Russia at first acted under the slogan "Join WTO Together" and Belarus followed. Over time, Russia decided it was too hard to join the WTO together and forsook Belarus and the other CIS states. Many CIS countries would find it difficult to join the WTO anyway because of U.S. and EU politics. However, Lukashenko felt confident that the CIS states could "make do" without WTO membership and that Belarus' markets would nevertheless be highly attractive. According to Lukashenko, the IMF and the World Bank admitted they could not counter Belarus' economic model and agreed Belarus was a fast-developing state.

¶8. The President opined that Russia would lose more than it plans to gain if it joined the WTO. Lukashenko referred to Russia's economic development minister's assessment that Russia's non-participation in WTO would result in a USD 700 million to 1.8 billion-loss for Russia, which, according to Lukashenko, is a small figure for such a wealthy country. In turn, participation would cause more problems for Russia, such as the "suffocation" of the Russian automotive and civil aviation industries and agriculture.

If He Wins.If He Loses

¶9. Lukashenko told reporters that despite the information war waged by the West, "very large" forces in the U.S., EU, and UK would de facto recognize him should he win the 2006 election. According to Lukashenko, these "forces" oppose pressuring Belarus, the center of Europe, since such pressure would not do Europeans any good. The President claimed these forces were just emerging and hailed such tendencies. According

to Lukashenko, the presidential election in Belarus would be a test not only for himself, but also for the GOB and all branches of power.

¶10. Lukashenko remarked that he would retire from politics if he lost the elections. He would use his dual degrees in history and economics, his ten years as president, and his management experience in agriculture to find a job. Lukashenko claims it would be better for him to leave now, with the economy blooming and people feeling much more prosperous, than ten years ago. However, he would run for president again because the country could lose its stability without him.

¶11. The President told reporters that if he lost the election, it would be such a serious blow to Russia that it would take a long time for Russia to "regain consciousness." Lukashenko claimed he would not rig the elections, because according to surveys, he already enjoys a 75 percent approval rating. Even the pollsters who are "paid by the Americans" give Lukashenko a 57 percent rating. The President predicted the U.S. would not prevent him from participating in the elections, but would prevent the world from recognizing him as the Belarusian leader should he win.

On domestic issues

¶12. Lukashenko told the reporters about his idea to establish labor camps for negligent parents. The purpose would be to force bad parents to work off the expense of their children's stay in orphanages and boarding schools.

¶13. The President does not plan to change his economic plan for the next five years. Private business would not be allowed to invest in Belarus' housing and municipal economy because it would force citizens to pay five to ten times more for utilities. Lukashenko then called foreign investors "cockroaches" that try to crawl into every hole and crack in Belarus. Only investments approved by the President are allowed in Belarus. This helps to eliminate competition for Belarusian producers and prevents private businesses from taking profits out of the country. Lukashenko also stated that only he has the right to allow agricultural lands to be privatized for non-agricultural purposes and that state and private property should be under his control.

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¶14. Lukashenko stated that he attends the Orthodox Church on Easter and Christmas because Belarusians "want to see him there." He supports construction of new Orthodox churches and claimed to support all confessions as they, likewise, support him. According to Lukashenko, certain functionaries in the Polish community tried to instigate an anti-Belarusian conflict but failed. Poles in Belarus are treated not as a minority (because this definition offends people) but as full-fledged Belarusian citizens.

¶15. The President opined that the Belarus population (10 million) is too small and needs to be 30 million, although the country can feed 70 million, to properly manage the land and turn it into "paradise." Lukashenko invited Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Azeris, and Muslims to move to Belarus. He also invited all "Jews" who once lived in Belarus but moved away. They are welcome back, but only "with money."

¶16. Lukashenko told reporters that Belarus has 1,200 mass media outlets, of which 380 are supported by the government. Belarusian authorities do sue the independent media for slanderous articles, but do

nothing more against them. The mass media is important for state ideology and, therefore, should not be privatized.

Comment

¶17. Lukashenko has used similar gatherings of friendly, passive Russian journalists to publicize his views on life, politics, and the Union state. In July, the President bashed the opposition and claimed he had no friends or money in an interview with journalist Oleg Poptsov (reftel). According to what contacts have told Poloff, these reporters, all from Russia's remote regions, receive USD 50 per day per diem, are put up in nice hotels (including Lukashenko's own resort in the Belavezhskaya Forest) and wined and dined. As such, they are likely to report positive on Belarus.

PHLIPOT